

**Andrew Horrall, *Bringing Art to Life: A Biography of Alan Jarvis*. Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009, 457 pp., 31 black-and-white photos, 17 colour plates, \$39.95**

Sarah Stanners

Volume 35, Number 1, 2010

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1066809ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1066809ar>

[See table of contents](#)

---

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

Cite this review

Stanners, S. (2010). Review of [Andrew Horrall, *Bringing Art to Life: A Biography of Alan Jarvis*. Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009, 457 pp., 31 black-and-white photos, 17 colour plates, \$39.95]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 35(1), 96–98.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1066809ar>

Andrew Horrall, *Bringing Art to Life: A Biography of Alan Jarvis*. Montreal & Kingston, McGill-Queen's University Press, 2009, 457 pp., 31 black-and-white photos, 17 colour plates, \$39.95.

The life of Alan Jarvis has finally been dealt the proper attention and sensitivity that it truly warrants in an extraordinarily detailed biography by Andrew Horrall. *Bringing Art to Life: A Biography of Alan Jarvis* was published by McGill-Queen's University Press as a part of a special initiative, supported by the Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation, to publish in-depth studies in Canadian art and Canada's visual and material culture. Horrall's book is the second publication in the series called McGill-Queen's/Beaverbrook Canadian Foundation Studies in Art History. The dust cover bears the designation "Biography, art history." Although "biography" is certainly a category in itself, it is also an enduring methodology for art history, beginning, perhaps, in the sixteenth century with Giorgio Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*. Jarvis's life is a prime example of how one individual can make an impact on the way in which we perceive and enjoy the visual arts in Canada. His life personifies the shift in English-speaking Canada from humble and largely Anglophile foundations to an international profile, which was not without fumbles in the transition.

I have made a concerted effort to avoid leading my review with words such as "tragedy" and "martyr," or even "beautiful," which now seem to be protocol when approaching the topic of Alan Jarvis. Jarvis was much more than that. He was a voice that aimed to educate and persuade. While he was a Rhodes Scholar, a factory manager, a film industry man, and the first director of the National Gallery of Canada who could call himself an artist, he also lost his father and brother at separate but equally critical times in his life—as a young boy and as a young man, respectively. He died alone, and in an alcoholic state, at the age of fifty-seven. These more intensely personal details are revealed, as never before, in Horrall's careful account. Until now, there have only been a scant few glosses of Jarvis's late life, which focus on his status as the former director of the National Gallery, and how that position ended.

Jarvis was born in Brantford, Ontario, on 26 July 1915. His father, Charles Arthur Jarvis, came from a modest background. Charles trained as an optician, which, at the time, did not require a university education. Horrall emphasizes Charles's tendency to embellish his standing in society, pointing out that he styled himself as "Dr Charles A. Jarvis OptD" (p. 13). Horrall's attention to this self-styling characteristic is apt, since it foreshadows the moments of social climbing in Alan's life that were a success more often from charisma than merit: he won a Rhodes Scholarship without being an athlete; he took a job in management at an aircraft manufacturing plant without any previous factory experience; and he accepted the directorship of

the National Gallery without having ever worked in a museum. This is not to say that Jarvis did not deserve his laurels or prove himself worthy upon appointment, but he did make the most of his natural wit. Good looks were another feature that Charles Jarvis passed on to both of his sons. Unfortunately, Alan was only three years old when his father died.

Colin, Alan's older brother by just under four years, was a promising child in every respect. He grew up to be a remarkable young man, who did well at both sports and academics at the University of Toronto. Colin suddenly died of leukemia at the age of twenty-one. With nuance, Horrall explores how Alan Jarvis spent the rest of his life with a sense of survivor's guilt that affected his self-esteem and left him permanently concerned with living up to his brother's unrealized potential. In his private life, Jarvis searched for father-brother replacements and mostly pursued homosexual relationships. In public, he was both celebrated and chastised for his bravado in communications. The loss of two major male role models in his life is suggested in this biography to be the root cause for his appeal to male relationships, and for his determination to show an air of confidence in order to hide his actual insecurities. These observations are plausible, but the twenty-first century reader feels slightly uneasy at the idea of finding a reason for his attraction to men. Furthermore, Horrall explicitly states that Jarvis was bisexual (p. 7), and although the evidence of chaperoning women on occasion, and his eventual marriage to a childhood friend and widowed mother, Betty, would validate this designation, I found Horrall's insistence on the point too pat.

Horrall is an archivist, which makes this biography an especially good source for any historian interested in the life and times of Jarvis, or his contemporaries, such as Sir Stafford Cripps, Gerald Murphy, and Douglas Duncan. The varied career path that preceded Jarvis's rise to the directorship at the National Gallery takes Douglas Ord no more than a few paragraphs to explain in his 2003 book on the National Gallery,<sup>1</sup> while Horrall takes chapters to explore the same territory and then deftly relates this employment history to the climax of his position at the Gallery. The rigour of Horrall's study compared to the inference found in Ord's text makes it hard to believe that they were products of the same press. Certainly, all previous attempts to recount the events that would lead to Jarvis's untimely departure from the National Gallery simply pale in comparison to the thorough explanation in the pages of *Bringing Art to Life*. In chapters three through nine, Horrall traces his subject's early working life by highlighting the consistent passion that Jarvis had for promoting adult education. The depression years matched Jarvis's formative years at the University of Toronto. It was at this time that adult education was promoted in public libraries and other institutions that could reach out to the unemployed and downtrodden. His first exposure to leader-

ship was in the role of counsellor at Camp Glenokawa during the summers of 1935 and 1936. In this outdoor environment he saw how the arts and education could work well together.

His own art education grew under the mentorship and loving companionship of Douglas Duncan. In his senior year at the U of T, the pair enthusiastically patronized and encouraged the work of painter David Milne, who, at that time, spent his days at Six Mile Lake. Jarvis was with Duncan in the fall of 1936 when Duncan set up the Picture Loan Society in Toronto—a venture based on British precedent, which would eventually become a hub of Canadian art appreciation. Modest living quarters on the premises became a safe haven for the couple, and Duncan also allowed Jarvis to set up a sculptor's studio. Duncan's support of his interests would culminate the summer before Oxford admitted Jarvis to a program of study based on aesthetics. That summer, Jarvis accompanied Duncan on his usual sojourn in Europe, this time via New York City, but they proceeded cautiously and their sexual relationship was never made public. Horrall reveals his consciousness of this pivotal time when he writes, "For a biographer, the friendships he made during this period were like a painting's vanishing point: they establish perspective and almost every subsequent opportunity in Jarvis's life could be traced back to this short interval" (p. 55). There is an appropriate level of self-consciousness on the part of the author, which does not jeopardize the scholarly nature of the text.

Jarvis's mastery of personal connections began with the experiences he gained outside the lecture halls of Oxford. He, for example, became friends with the prominent art collector Sir Michael Sadler and lovers with Christopher Martin, who was an arts administrator at Dartington Hall—an upscale alternative education experiment in rural England—where Jarvis was offered a fellowship to teach and study. Owing partly to the outbreak of war, Jarvis did not complete his scholarship at Oxford and instead lived in New York and Toronto between 1939 and 1941. He attended New York University's Institute of Fine Arts but stayed enrolled for only nine months. His stint in New York brought him in touch with social heavies such as Gerald Murphy, but he eventually returned to Toronto, tellingly at around the same time the Canadian-born British ex-patriot Wyndham Lewis was writing *Self-Condemned* (1954)—a biting novel based on Lewis's feelings of being stuck in Toronto.

The war would not deter Jarvis from returning to England to begin his life as a professional. His personal rapport blossomed there, and so he settled in England for thirteen years before moving back to Canada to take up the directorship in Ottawa 1955. He came to know Sir Kenneth and Jane Clark, who soon invited him to dinners and social events where he rubbed elbows with Laurence Olivier, Noël Coward, T.S. Eliot, Graham Sutherland, Vivien Leigh, Leslie Howard, and Sybil Colefax. He also became close friends with Sir Stafford

Cripps, who served as Chancellor of the Exchequer from 1947 to 1950. Jarvis and Cripps came to know each other during the war, when Cripps was the minister of Aircraft Production and Jarvis worked at Parnall Aircraft Limited. Cripps was eager to involve Jarvis in initiatives such as the Industrial Bureau of Current Affairs. When the Labour Party won its first majority in 1945, Jarvis dedicated his working life even more intensely to Cripps. His relationship with the Cripps family led him to make an impact on efforts to reform the Church of England and promote British-based industrial design. He was helping to rebuild post-war Britain. His rallying spirit behind industrial design campaigns, such as "Britain Can Make It," are shown by Horrall to eventually fertilize his communication strategies for educating the public about modern art. Television was just one medium that Jarvis embraced.

When a promotion within the Council of Industrial Design seemed out of reach, Jarvis switched gears and joined Pilgrim Pictures while his close proximity to the leadership of the country made his profile attractive. This new and more glamorous film industry environment contrasted the moralistic aims of his efforts under Cripps. This new job, and the ultimate failure of Pilgrim Pictures as a company, propelled him into a serious drinking habit. He eventually returned to his skills in adult education when he accepted a tough and far less public job as Head of the Oxford House in Bethnal Green, an Anglican mission in East London. By 1954, Jarvis began to inquire about his chances at the directorship of the Nation Gallery of Canada. With a number of assurances, such as a recommendation from Sir Kenneth Clark, he returned to Canada with the mind-set of being a man of international repute. Horrall does well at pointing to Jarvis's "blurred" Canadian identity, noting how he "spoke like a barrister...but paddled a canoe like someone who had been raised in the bush" (pp. 243–44).

Jarvis began his position as director of the National Gallery in 1955. In the spirit of Jean Sutherland Bogg's recollection of his directorship of the Gallery in her 1971 book, *The National Gallery of Canada*,<sup>2</sup> Horrall gives special attention to the tangible impact Jarvis made on the Gallery by reproducing, in glossy colour, a selection of acquisitions that were made during his few years as director. Some of his best purchases for the Gallery were of modern sculpture, including Auguste Rodin's *Age of Bronze* (1875–76), Jacob Epstein's *Rock Drill* (1913–16), and Henry Moore's *Reclining Woman* (1930). Superior paintings by artists such as Francis Bacon, Marc Chagall, Jacques de Tonnancour, Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, James Wilson Morrice, and Paul-Émile Borduas were added to the collection, which helped to build a solid foundation for future acquisitions of avant-garde art.

Horrall's study provides the most satisfying explanation to date of the complicated events that led to Jarvis's resignation from the Gallery in 1959. It has become second hand to say

that Jarvis slipped by promising to purchase a painting from the Prince of Lichtenstein without having the official go-ahead, but this does not fly after Horrall's lengthy explanation. Jarvis became the victim of a political decision and change in government at a pivotal time when a long-negotiated art deal was coming to a head between the National Gallery and the Prince of Lichtenstein. The failure of this art deal forced his resignation and irreparably damaged his sense of self-worth. He was also too outspoken about trying to get Canada beyond its provincial habits in art appreciation and, in particular, about a symbolic relic of our colonial past—the Queen Mary's Carpet. The trustees of the Gallery knew that he did not possess a curatorial background and they justified this lack by using his vibrant personality and natural ability to speak freely in public. Significantly, such traits in a Gallery director did not sit well with the new majority government under John Diefenbaker. This is not the format for a detailed relay of Horrall's findings on the issue, but it is important to emphasize that politicians are perhaps the worst individuals to handle a major international art deal, which requires expert knowledge of the art market, swift action and payment, and necessary commissions. The Canadian government slipped on all of these necessary steps. Although Jarvis was blocked by the government from purchasing a Breughel painting from the Lichtenstein collection for \$400,000, he made an appeal and asked for permission to purchase the painting for \$350,000 with an added bonus of a Lorenzo Monaca painting for another \$95,000 from funds that the trustees felt had been set aside for Lichtenstein purchases. Government ministers approved this approach and authorized the said funds to be used. On these grounds, Jarvis contacted the London dealer who was arranging the deal to say that they would take the Monaca painting. Meanwhile, Minister Davie

Fulton discovered that a Lichtenstein fund was never officially created and surprised Jarvis with the orders to stop the purchase (p. 283). Jarvis had already given his word to the London dealer who went ahead and purchased the painting on the Gallery's behalf, which was normal practice. Although Jarvis tried to stop the purchase, the deal was already done. What followed was a storm of finger pointing in the media and on Parliament Hill, which finally resulted in Jarvis accepting the firm suggestion of Minister Ellen Fairclough to resign. The chapter that follows his resignation is peppered with descriptions of high-end cultural jobs, leadership positions and consulting roles that he accepted, but it is notably unfocused and dispassionate—much like the inner state of Jarvis from 1960 on.

What stands out most in the history of Jarvis is his departure from the National Gallery, which was so tragic that it inspired Robertson Davies to use him as the basis of an ill-fated character (Aylwin Ross) in his novel *What's Bred in the Bone* (1985). Perhaps it is appropriate that a work of fiction has stood to spark the greatest interest in Jarvis, since his actual life was, as Horrall paints it, made up of several masks. My hope is, however, that the non-fiction that Horrall presents will inspire an even greater interest in who Alan Jarvis really was.

SARAH STANNERS  
Postdoctoral Fellow  
University of British Columbia

#### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Douglas Ord, *The National Gallery of Canada: Ideas, Art, Architecture* (Montreal & Kingston, 2003), 134–35.
- <sup>2</sup> Jean Sutherland Boggs, *The National Gallery of Canada* (Toronto, 1971), 46–54.

William Tronzo, ed., *The Fragment, An Incomplete History*. Getty Publications, 2009, 232 pp., 57 colour and 40 black-and-white illus., 3 line drawings, 5 tables, 1 map, hardcover \$50 U.S., ISBN 978-0-89236-926-3.

There is something playful in this collection of essays. That is not to say it is not a serious critical work, but the heterogeneity of its subjects—from the *Laokoon* to B-movie ectobrain—reflects a sense of scholarly brio that is, frankly, fun to read. Under the rubric of “the fragment,” William Tronzo has brought together eleven very different, but interconnected perspectives on the material, aesthetics, and phenomenology of the relationship between parts and their wholes (and holes within parts). The strength of the book lies not in the acuity of the individual chapters (readers will find some essays more congruent with

their interests than others) but in its intellectual expansiveness. This expansiveness is heralded by both the cover and the frontispiece. The first shows Cornelia Parker's *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View* (1991), a garden shed destroyed in a controlled explosion and displayed as suspended debris lit by a single, central bulb; the second shows Raymond Pettibon's *No Title (In A Universe)* (1992), a pen and ink drawing of a diminutive, shouting figure whose gaping, black mouth utters random letters denying the *logos* of the biblical Genesis. The energy and outward momentum of both works constitute a manifesto that denies the volume an overarching *logos* and demands that readers construct their own critical narrative as each chapter provides branching-off points for new reveries and connections. Of course, all edited collections require this from their readers, but rarely do they call us to join in the play of ideas. The explosive